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Russian Politics: What We Fail to See

This country is engaged in a widespread post-mortem on the government's failure to anticipate the course of events in Iran, but our intelligence problem now is not in becoming alert to change in Iran, but in avoiding a similar insensitivity to change in other countries. To a specialist on the Soviet Union, there are disturbing parallels between our current efforts to understand the Soviet Union and our earlier intelligence effort in Iran.

The U.S. government and journalists have, of course, had a great deal of contact with representatives of the dissident movement in Moscow. However, the dissidents themselves

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have become very discouraged about their own chances for success, and contact with them has led to the conviction that the Soviet regime is unchanging and unchangeable in the near future.

But what if the dissidents are not the real force for change in the Soviet Union? What if there are forces within the Soviet establishment itself that have the potential of producing major evolution within the Soviet Union?

If this is the case, the United States will be as surprised by events as it was in Iran. The sad fact is that the U.S. government is almost totally unequipped to assess long-term political developments within the Soviet establishment. The American embassy in Moscow has only four persons in the political section who study internal Soviet developments; two of whom concentrate on Kremlinological questions and two who basically focus on the Jewish and dissident questions. The main focus of the CIA political analysis of the Soviet system seems, in practice, to flow primarily from its requirement to contribute to the morning news briefing of the president. Hence, it, too, concentrates on current affairs and the unknowable alignments within the Politburo.

As a result, the U.S. government devotes extremely little attention to the vigorous debates on policy options and on changes in the political system that are published in the Soviet Union. For example, the Soviet journal dealing with Latin America has carried most interesting and important debates on the future of Latin America and on which developments in that region the Soviet Union should support. It is a continuing debate with important implications for Soviet views of Asia, Africa and even Europe. Yet, the journal is almost never read in the American embassy in Moscow; and, so far as I can tell, it is not read anywhere in the State Department or CIA in Washington.

The situation with respect to domestic policy discussions is worse. The Commerce Department does a good job in following the debates that relate to the growing Central Asian population. But no one is trying to map out the economic debate as a whole and the positions of the major institutional actors in it—and this at a time when Soviet policy intellectuals are giving enormous attention to the implications of the labor shortage impending in the 1980s.

Indeed, although almost all the major Soviet economists are loudly arguing for greater wage differentials and a reversal of the long trend toward wage egalitarianism, a great many responsible Americans are convinced that the Brezhnev era has featured a growth in the relative privilege of the elite. Hence we do not even know one of the most elemental and basic facts about the nature of the Soviet economic problem, and we have no awareness of the resulting pressures for major reductions in military expenditures if the international situation were more appropriate.

The time to improve our intelligence operations is not after the disaster, but before. Reform in Russia has traditionally come from the top, but leaders' actions are normally influenced by their apparatus and the currents of opinion among the policy intelligentsia. If we do not know what those persons are saying (often quite openly), we will continue to be blind to major currents for change that exist. Even worse, we inevitably will be affecting Soviet internal developments by our policies without any awareness of the nature of the effect. In fact, leading liberals within the Soviet establishment insist that American policy has been seriously harming their cause.

With the amount of money that is spent on trying to find out about the Soviet Union, it is absolutely inexcusable that we know as little as we do about its politics. It is even more inexcusable and dangerous that our ideological blinders lead us to smugly assume that there is no middle-level politics worth studying and that it cannot have an impact on the future. It was such an attitude that led to our failure of understanding in Iran.

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